Aquila Rift

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Aquila Rift

by BumblebeesAndDandelions

Summary

Aquila Rift (Love Death Robots) retelling with Hannigram.

Waking up from cryo, the crew quickly find their ship has gone off course. Luckily, there is a familiar face at the repair station they land at.

Notes

June 17 - | Doubt |

“How’s it look, Katz?” Captain Crawford called, still focused on his own controls.

This run had been a dream so far, and they all knew the Captain was eager to get home early and surprise his wife. Beverly, their navigator, replied, something about a shortcut, and Captain agreed to it.

Zeller and Price were running around like headless chickens, trying to get everything in its place before the jump. They always waited until the last minute, and they always got everything in its place. Freddie had taken to hiding things, just to watch them panic.

“Where do you plan to spend the downtime, Graham? There’s a wonderful restaurant on Tarbi that-“ Chilton was blabbering to him again. He was new to the crew, taken on mostly as a consultant. He was Bloom's replacement, supposed to be a mediator, not trying to get into Will’s pants like he’d been doing this whole run. His undisguised lust coated Will like smog. Three weeks of Chilton and Will was just about ready to throw himself from the airlock.

He ignored the man as best he could, sending rough reports to Jack, to be looked over later. He was, according to Beverly, their ‘people person’, despite being the engineer. Freddie could talk her way into just about any space port, Will was the one making sure they weren’t getting scammed.

“How’s it look, Graham?”

“The Q-jibs are a touch misaligned. Might be a rough transition, but we’re ready to go.”

They’d needed repairs at the last stop, and not all of them had been completed yet, but they were travel worthy, and everyone was getting a bit antsy. It would work, and that was good enough. At least they’d be home soon, he could use a break.

“That’s what I like to hear. Everyone! You’re finishing now, and getting to your pod.”

More scrambling, last minute preps. Freddie was still tapping away at her screen, writing some review about the last planet’s nightlife. The reporter paid practically nothing to tag along in their ship, as long as she encouraged people to write favorable reviews of them.

Jack was securing their jump time with dispatch. The long line of ships waiting to jump stretched behind them, all headed to different ports, and they didn’t want to be the ones to hold it up.

“Arkangel dispatch, this is Blue Goose. Ready for us?”

The radio at the front of the ship crackled, voice muffled from where Will sat, perched on the edge of his pod.

Final calculations, the route set, and they were all tucking down into their pods. Bev wished them sweet dreams, Zeller laughed, and they were asleep. The ship would fly them back home on its own.

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Alarms were blaring.

Loud klaxons echoing through the ship, accompanied by flashing red lights. Will's pod was open, deactivated. He stumbled out of it, trying to orient himself. Pod sleep was the deepest sleep one could have without being dead, waking up was supposed to be a slow ride, not the shock of sirens.

Yelling. Captain Crawford was at the main controls, doing… something. Will winced, the emergency lights burning his eyes.

They weren't crashing, the ship felt stable. He made his way up to Jack, clinging to the wall for support, legs unsteady.

"Asteroid field?" Will guessed, collapsing into the copilots seat.

"Repair station. I don't recognize it."

Will blinked, convinced he'd heard the man wrong. There weren't any repair stations on their route, there weren't even any close. But no, put their windows, the massive repair station loomed, glittering and silver.

"What's our damage?" Had something happened before he woke up? Had Jack been forced to chart them this far off course to save the ship? But he would have woken Will up for that, he'd have wanted his engineer.

"No fucking clue. Half the systems are offline. I woke up right before you did." Jack glared at the controls like he could intimidate them into cooperating with him.

They watched, helpless to do anything else, as the ship was pulled into the space station by repair drones, docking in the massive open space. There were less than a handful of other ships in the port, an unexpected barrenness for a repair station. It set Will on edge. Their return trip was supposed to go nearly directly into the more populated sectors, and the stations there were always hives of activity.

Jack left the controls to start pulling their team from their pods. Chilton and Beverly. Freddie woke up on her own, climbing out of her pod, and then the ship shook slightly.

Will was off center, still feeling the effects of the rude awakening. Time slid around him, and they were docked. The doors slid open, revealing a man flanked by two suited engineers.

The man smiled at them, reassuring. He had just started saying something about the repair station, before Chilton interrupted him, exclaiming,

"Lecter? What are you doing here?"

Jack frowned, turning to Chilton. "You know him? Have you been to this station, Chilton?"

Chilton stuttered, leaning against the wall for balance. “Here? No- I just. You’re Hannibal Lecter! We were at that conference, you were one of the speakers. Really amazing insight on social exclusion, really.” Chilton gushed.

Wonderful. Another psychiatrist. Maybe he’d be amazing enough to get Chilton off his back for a bit.

Jack, already annoyed with Chilton, turned back to the man, dr. Lecter.

“What station are we at, doctor? My crew was itching to get home, and I’m not happy about this myself.”

Hannibal hesitated, glancing between them, before answering. Nervous, maybe, but Will couldn’t read him. He was more affected than he thought, apparently. Reading people was usually as easy as breathing, in ability if not in consequence.

“We are in Saumlaki Starion, located in the Schedar Sector. I’m afraid repairs to your ship will take at least a few weeks, but I am happy to accommodate you for the time you will be staying.”

They all froze, staring at Dr Lecter in varying states of disbelief. Chilton looked particularly pale.

“Schedar?” Jack asked, anger rising,”that’s light years off our course. How the hell did we get here?”

“A routing error. It’s how everyone gets here.”

Will had pulled Beverly from her tank, and she was frowning at the doctor.

“No way- a routing error couldn’t take us this far off course.” She argued, leaning against Will for support. They were all weak from the pods.

Hannibal offered another smile, comforting. “I myself was a victim to the same error, unfortunately. But please, rouse your friends, and we can find a strong drink to take your mind off this misfortune.”

Chilton and Beverly found their footing while Jack and Will pulled the others up. Freddie came awake with a vengeance, spitting and coughing.

Price and Zeller both collapsed within minutes of waking, complaining of headaches before passing out. Hannibal looked them over. They had pod sickness, apparently, would have to go back in the pods until they could nager home. Chilton backed his diagnosis, eager to ingratiate himself with someone clearly more reputable than him.

The lounge was lush, with a massive bar that Beverly and Will quickly took advantage of. Freddie was grilling their host for information, and Chilton was trying to compare their exploits in a way that made him seem more impressive. It would be a long couple weeks for Hannibal if they kept that up the whole time, Will thought wryly.

The windows stretched from ceiling to floor, wall to wall, showcasing the fragments of a shattered moon, spreading apart into infinity. It was beautiful.

“Just beyond the edge of the debris field, to the far left, is the Aquila Rift. Gorgeous, isn’t it?”

Hannibal had come up behind him without Will noticing. Will hummed in agreement, eyes caught on the blue glow of the Rift.

They stood there for an endless moment, in silence, looking into space.

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The station was nearly deserted, apart from Hannibal and the few engineers. They each had their own room, Will choosing one as far away from Chilton as he could get.

It meant that, when someone was walking through the halls late that night , Will was near enough to be woken.

It was Hannibal and Jack. Jack was angry about something, probably trying to get a more solid timeline on repairs. He’d be anxious to get back, more than any of them. His wife was sick. No one on the crew was supposed to know, but Will had seen the delayed grief the first time he’d returned from break. He wanted to be with her, and he was stuck here- it would make anyone angry, and Jack was always more prone to explosive anger.

Will waited until they’d passed him, and slipped out of his room to follow, keeping around the corner, out of sight. He turned, and Freddie was there, clearly doing the same thing he was. He glared at her, and she glared back, making a shooing motion with her hand. He flipped her off, unable to do anything else without alerting the others they were being followed. At a stalemate, they both pressed to the door when Jack and Hannibal closed themselves in a room.

Through it, they could hear the conversation almost perfectly.

“… Make any sense, Doctor Lecter. We weren’t supposed to be anywhere near the Schedar sector.”

“Captain Crawford, may I confess something to you? I lied, earlier, in front of your crew, so as to not alarm them. We are not in the Schedar sector.”

“Then where the hell are we, doctor?”

“If you’ll look…”

There was silence, and Freddie pressed closer to the door to try to hear whatever was happening. After a moment, Jack was yelling again, angrier than before, more panicked.

“That’s over 150,000 light years away from earth!”

Freddie’s eyes bugged, and then she was turning the door handle and pushing into the room. Will fell into the room as well, having been leaning on the door. He froze when the two men

turned to look at them, but Freddie was already talking.

“Is what he said true? Are we really that far from Earth? How long were we asleep?” She pelted Hannibal with questions, with the expression on her face that she always got when she’d found a scoop of a story. She always felt hungry to Will when she’d found something that interested her.

He considered her, glancing at Will and Jack. Choosing his words.

“I was telling the truth, Miss Lounds. And to answer your last question, due to time dilation, you were only asleep a few months. Back on earth, however, several hundred years have passed.”

Jack reacted to that, a wounded growl escaping him. Pain and horror rolled off him in waves. Grief, too. His wife was dead, long since. Their shortcut had pulled forward centuries. Will didn’t have anyone back on earth to mourn, but the grief Jack was feeling was potent enough to make Will want to collapse.

“How did you get here then?” Freddie asked, far to focused on her hunt for information to notice Jack breaking in front of her.

“The same way everyone does. A routing error.”

Jack’s grief was a lump in Will’s throat, making it hard to swallow, difficult to talk. He swallowed it with effort.

“We’re trapped here, then,” he got out, looking at Hannibal like he was a lifeline.

Hannibal looked regretful, like he was sorry to have to tell them this news. He didn’t feel regretful though, he still didn’t feel like anything, and it was more noticeable now, contrasted against Jack’s overload of emotion.

“Yes. We all are. So I suggest we all find our beds, and try for some rest.” With that, he strode out of the room, tailed by Freddie still plying him for information.

Will got Jack up, led the man to his room and made sure he would be fine, before retiring to his own room.

He lay in bed, mind racing. The distance was so great as to be meaningless. The time dilation even more so. Everyone he’d ever known was either on this station or dead, and had been for centuries and centuries. His house would be gone, his little spaceship models and fly gear likely at the bottom of a now ancient dump.

At least he they were alive, here. At least the bed was comfortable, and the view was incredible.

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Jack didn’t come out of his room for two days. Beverly and Will took turns checking on him.

He told her the truth about where they were as soon as she woke up the next day. She cracked a joke about being an oldest sibling, and now being the oldest by an even wider margin, and then went to her room and cried. No one expects to outlive their younger siblings. No one expects to lose everyone they know in one fell swoop.

Freddie was the one that told Chilton. She almost certainly did it just to see how the man broke.

The next few days passed in a daze. Everyone was coming to terms with their new reality. Will had a persistent headache. It wasn't terrible, just a constant pounding in the back of his head.

Will wandered the station, peering into empty room after empty room. It really was deserted. If they were that far away from anyone else, those few ships in the port could be from people decades ago, centuries. He wondered which one was Hannibal's.

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They were eating lunch together. Jack had come out of his room late last night, haggard and with deep bags under his eyes, and he was just staring at his food, pushing it around aimlessly.

Beverly had bounced back remarkably fast, although much of the emotion she put on was false. She was grieving, and the humor she tried to exude felt sticky sweet, melted cotton candy on his skin. She was trying though, and Will couldn't fault her for that.

Freddie was staring daggers at Hannibal, who was serenely focused on his food. She'd been on the man like a tick ever since they arrived, but this was different. She was feeling suspicious now, smoky and prodding. Will hated her when she was suspicious, it was usually directed at him, and she felt no qualms about personal privacy.

"You don't have any things." She told Hannibal. Hannibal paused in cutting his chicken, and looked at her. He felt… calm, at least in that he felt like nothing else. Will still couldn't read him, and it bugged him. It felt like a hole in his senses, a blank spot on a canvas that had been covered in layers and layers of paint his entire life.

"Pardon me, Miss Lounds? What do you mean?"

"Your room, it's completely empty."

Hannibal smiled, tight and slightly annoyed. He had quickly shown himself to be a stickler for politeness, and Will couldn't imagine he'd take kindly to his room being gone through.

"There is a dreadful lack of trade ships that pass this way, I'm afraid. It has made it difficult to decorate."

Freddie frowned, annoyed. Will stabbed at his chicken. It tasted almost real, despite being from a nutrient machine. Hannibal really was a good cook to make it taste like anything other

than hardened paste. His headache hadn't gone away, but it had subsided slightly, at least until Freddie started talking.

"No- I mean, your room is empty. This place is… wrong, somehow, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it." Freddie declared, finishing her tofu block. She had opted against Hannibal's cooking, citing her vegetarian diet.

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Will found her the next day, leaning heavily against the wall by his room. She was mumbling something, and when Will went to slip past her into his room, she snapped out and grabbed him. Her fingers dug into his arms, tight enough to hurt.

"He's not the real one, Will. I don't know-," she cut off, releasing Will to clutch her head. Will considered, for just a moment, what the worst case scenario would really be if he just left her here. He really didn't want to deal with crazy Lounds, sane Lounds was bad enough. The deciding factor was the fact she was outside his door, and he didn't want to be surprised when he tried to leave later.

He led her, practically carrying her, to the main lounge. Chilton was there, and Will forced the man to look at her. Chilton had been drinking nearly continuously since being told how far they were from Earth, but he could probably still help her. Even if he couldn't, Will had done enough to be satisfied.

Honestly, with the shock of the news and the weight of their losses, it was a miracle everyone else was dealing with it at all. Chilton drinking and Jack's isolation were far better than whatever was going on with Lounds. At least all he had were headaches, in comparison.

He nearly made it back to his room before his headache spiked, pain blurring his vision. He stumbled, clutching the wall for balance, and Hannibal was there, looking concerned.

"Are you alright, Will?" He asked, steadying him.

Will nodded, pressing one hand to the side of his head. The pressure helped the headache, a bit.

Hannibal walked with him back to his room, insisting on making sure Will was okay.

He was kind, Hannibal. Handsome, with sharp cheekbones and amber eyes. Will wouldn't have talked to him in any other space port, convinced the man was out of league, but…

Hannibal was close, hands feeling Will's head, breath warming Will's forehead. He still didn't feel like anything, and the lack of emotion suddenly frustrated Will. He wanted to break that blankness, he wanted to make Hannibal feel something.

It made him impulsive, that want.

He jerked forward, pressing his lips against Hannibal's. After a second, Hannibal responded, deepening the kiss and twisting a hand in Will's curls. Will loaned against Hannibal's lips, hands tracing the man's back, his sides.

He felt solid and warm.

He didn't feel like anything. He was still blank.

Will pushed away, panting. Hannibal watched him, lips reddened. He looked beautiful. He felt like nothing, and it was driving Will insane.

“You’re not really Doctor Lecter, are you? Lounds was right.”

Hannibal smiled, looking almost sad, but Will still couldn’t read him. He was as blank as he’d been the whole time. Inhumanly blank.

“No. But I would advise you to stop looking, Will.”

Will shook his head, pacing now. He was trapped here, they were all trapped here, and people kept getting sick, kept-

“What are you doing to them? What are you?”

“How quickly you deny me humanity, Will,” Hannibal replied, sidestepping the first question, “does it matter what I am? If it is any consolation, I am as trapped in this place as you.”

“Where. Am. I.” Will ground out. He was holding the bottle of whiskey, the closest thing to a weapon in the room.

“You’re still in your tank, still asleep. This station, everything in it, is a simulation. So tell me Will, what do you plan to do with that bottle?”

The bottle was shaking, liquid sloshing. No- Will was shaking. He dropped the bottle, watched it shatter, glass and whiskey spraying out on the ground.

“Show me.” He demanded, voice shaking.

Hannibal shook his head. He tried to step closer to Will, close the distance Will had put between them, but he stopped when Will growled.

“You aren’t the first that’s discovered the truth, Will. I have been through this countless times, and the end result is always the same.” That awful calmness was still on his face. That awful, consuming blankness without emotion. It was fake, it was all fake. That was why he couldn’t feel Hannibal.

“I need to see. Show me.” He repeated, teeth gritted. He would regret this, he knew, but he couldn’t turn back.

Hannibal hesitated, lips thinning, before he nodded.

“Alright, Will.”

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It was darker, warmer. The ground was gone, the walls and ceiling too, covered in pulsing ropes of dark something, thick and alive. The air felt thinner in his lungs.

Before him was an open cavern, massive and layered in the same dark, fleshy webs. His ship hung there, suspended by the stuff that covered the place, torn nearly in two. It looked like a murder, twisted and gutted and mounted.

Panicking now, Will climbed shakily out of his pod, the lid down but the glass missing. The floor pulsed slightly under his feet, and he wanted to throw up. He didn't know where he was trying to go, other then away from here.

There were other pods next to him, lined up like they had been on the ship. Zeller was next to him, dead. A decayed husk. The next pod over was empty, and the next, and-

Will

Hannibal's voice echoed in the darkness, layered with dozens of different tones, accents.

Will whipped towards movement from his left, watching in horror as Hannibal moved into the light.

He was… it was big. Will struggled to look at him, struggled to look away. There were long, articulated limbs and teeth, and- it was too much- Will fell backwards, screwing his eyes shut and clutching his head in his hands.

He couldn't make sense of whatever Hannibal was. Looking at him hurt, too much for Will's brain to process.

Blind, he realized something new. He could feel Hannibal now. It wasn't intelligible, not really. Whatever Hannibal felt or thought, it was so inhuman to be completely alien. It buffeting him, overwhelmed him, but he clung to it. Emotions, he could deal with, far easier than the reality he would be forced to deal with should he open his eyes again.

Somewhere above him, or in front of him, Hannibal sighed, almost mournful.

I warned you, dear boy. I will not leave you to suffer a broken mind. Close your eyes, wade into the quiet of your mind, and I will rewind the illusion to your awakening. This can be forgotten.

There were footsteps moving closer to Will, and he didn't want to forget, couldn't go through this again.

"No! Please, don't, I'm not- not broken, please." Will begged, eyes still pressed shut.

The footsteps stopped, and Will felt another of Hannibal's emotions wash over him. Surprise? Disappointment? Anger? He didn't have a reference point, and had no way to know. The feeling of emotions calmed him though, the same way his lack in the dream had set Will on edge.

You're talking.

It sounded almost like a question.

“Please, I just, I just need a minute. Don’t erase my memories, I can’t-“ Will cut himself off, pressing his palms harder against his sockets.

I… find myself constantly underestimating you, my dear Will. My deepest apologies.

Will was torn between breaking down sobbing and laughing hysterically, and neither would do much in convincing Hannibal he was sane enough to remain. He needed something to hold onto, here, or he would break, and Hannibal would make him forget.

“What…,” Will swallowed, trying again, “what are you feeling, now?”

What do you mean, Will?

“I can feel you, here, but I can’t read you. I need- a reference point. Please.” It felt like a weakness to admit. Hannibal could lie, say anger was calm and he’d never know until Hannibal was tearing him apart, but he needed something he could understand here.

I am feeling many emotions at the moment, most as a result of you. Curiosity, excitement. I find myself taking a sort of pride in your resilience.

As he spoke, the emotions continued to wash over him, endless and constant in a way human emotions weren’t. There was a brighter bit, sharper, that Will labeled excitement, and a softer one, eddying and new, that he decided was pride. He shuddered, relaxing slightly despite himself.

Hannibal hummed, closer then he’d expected him to be. The pride eddying around Will deepened. It felt almost warm. They stayed there a moment, as Will sorted emotions as best he could, until they settled against him, unfamiliar still but no longer as alien. Hannibal was feeling something like excitement, but not. Excitement had teeth and a hunger, this was more joyful, teeth blunted but still there.

I find myself… eager. You are the first I have met who did not break at the sight of me. Would you look again?

Again? Will had barely lasted five seconds the first time. And yet… he wanted to, even as his brain screamed at him. He wanted to see, to know, Hannibal. The spider at the center of the web, who found itself intrigued by the fly.

Will could stop again, if he had to. He just had to talk, and Hannibal would let him recover. He could do it.

He tried again, forcing himself to focus on details, ignoring the whole of him. Black skin, a messy pattern of knots and smoothness. His hands were almost similar to Will’s, but they were bigger, clawed and dark. There were too many limbs, too many of everything, and the seeing of all of them threatened to send Will back into his corner, so he forced himself to ignore it. Hannibal’s eyes, all of them, were black. They looked like a spider’s, like the big brown ones that had nested under his windowsill in his childhood summers.

Hannibal moved closer, still watching Will. In blank, numb curiosity, Will reached out to touch one of his limbs. It was smooth, almost silky, and hard. The knotted, irregular patterns looked like scarring, long since healed.

He wasn't- he was an alien, but not- lovecraftian. He was alive, real. He could be understood, sort of. Will wouldn't break when he saw him, at least. His teeth were sharp, fangs double the length of the rest of them. He ate food. Which meant-

"Are you eating them?"

Price and Zeller, with their pod sickness keeping them asleep. Freddie, falling ill. At least, that was true in the simulation. Which just meant, likely, that their brains weren't there anymore to put in the simulation, because they were dead. And Hannibal was a thing that could eat.

The man named Zeller died on the journey here. Price… It has been years since the last ship was caught in that routing error. I confess, I was too hungry to resist.

Will gagged, curling tighter, but kept his eyes on Hannibal.

Lounds isn't dead. Smart girl, she saw something she wasn't supposed to. Clawed her own eyes out before I could put her back to sleep.

None of the emotions accompanying those words registered with Will. They were all too alien. They felt smooth, almost scaled.

"Are you going to eat me?" It was a stupid question. He'd seen their ship- it was destroyed. They were hundreds of thousands of light years from home. He was always going to die here, what did it really matter if he died to Hannibal instead of age or lack of food?

Not now. I find you too interesting to end your life so prematurely, Will.

"Will you put me back in your simulation?" He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to return. It was… cleaner, there, smoother, but it was fake, and Will wasn't sure he could last in a world that he knew wasn't real.

Hannibal moved, a sort of shrug or tilt of the body. Hesitation curled around him, alongside that deceptively gentle curiosity.

Do you want to return? I could not put you back without resetting, although you could retain your memories if you wished.

There was something else, under the hesitation, hidden. It felt like- a receding tide, pulling the sand at his feet. The soft rot of an old tree. It was- rejection. Hannibal was feeling rejected. He viewed it as Will rejecting him, choosing the fantasy instead. He thought Will would choose the fantasy.

Did he want to return, though? The falseness could, with effort, be forgotten. It was a perfect illusion, crafted by Hannibal. Hannibal, who he wouldn't be able to feel in the illusion. Hannibal, who would feel betrayed if he chose the illusion.

The other option was this place. A nightmare made real. The air was thin enough to burn his lungs, the halls were choked with the alien tendrils. Time could be stretched in the illusion, here, he didn't have food, or water, he'd barely last a week. He'd die either way, but in the illusion, Hannibal could just lay him to sleep. Here, it would hurt. Here, it was real. Not just his death, but the air, the halls. Hannibal.

There wasn't really a choice at all, with those options. Will knew which one he'd pick. He'd known since he discovered the truth.

The Aquila Rift was visible from here, glowing blue.

At least the view was incredible.

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